



Implications of National Study of Youth and Religion Findings for Religious Leaders, Faith Communities, and Youth Workers¹ • *Christian Smith*

In the conclusion of our book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Melinda Lundquist Denton, my coauthor, and I said that we intended the book to be, among other things, a stimulus for soul-searching conversations among adults in various communities and organizations about the place and importance of adolescents in our lives and, in particular, the significance of the religious and spiritual lives of teenagers today. We anticipated that our findings would provoke such discussions within churches and other religious organizations in particular. In order to provide a bit of initial input to those discussions, we step out of our normal sociological roles in this lecture—with more than a little trepidation—to try to imagine some of the book's possible prescriptive implications for communities of faith. To be perfectly clear about our purpose here: we are academic sociologists, not religious ministry consultants or promoters. Nevertheless, detailed knowledge and understanding of the social world often raises real questions about cultural and institutional practices and commitments that can make real differences in people's lives. We expect that churches will be interested in pondering the implications of our research and so we offer here some preliminary ideas that seem to us to emerge from our findings. What follows is not conclusive or exhaustive. Nor does it apply to every church or religious institution. It will finally be up to various traditions, communities, and organizations, if they wish, to digest the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) and consider implications relevant for their own contexts, constituencies, and activities. However, certain possible, initial implications of NSYR findings do seem worth offering for consideration. When we reflect upon what we have discovered about youth and religion in the NSYR, the following possible implications for churches and other religious organizations come to mind.

To begin, we suggest that faith communities would do well to stop accepting and promulgating what may be simplistic generalizations about American youth that originated from various popular book authors, substandard research studies, journalistic coverage of youth, common stereotypes about teens, and so on. We have observed a noticeable tendency when it comes to youth—including among youth ministry workers—to overgeneralize, overstate issues, frame situations in alarmist or fear-based terms, and latch onto simplistic answers to alleged problems. But the fact is that the lives, including the religious lives, of American youth are diverse and complicated. Thus, religious communities may do well to learn to be more discerning, more skeptical of alarmist claims, less captivated by trendy popular books, and more perceptive about the diversity and complexity of the experience and situation of U.S. teenagers. We suspect that they would likely then be more effective in planning programs, prioritizing initiatives, and working with teens in ways more true to their own traditions and identities and more effective over the long run.

Moreover, our findings suggest to us that religious leaders and communities should also stop presuming that U.S. teenagers are actively alienated by religion, are dropping out of their religious congregations in large numbers, cannot relate to adults in their congregations, and so need some radically new “post-modern” type of program or ministry. None of this seems to us to be particularly true. Some middle-aged religious leaders may project their own experience of the 1960s and 1970s onto teenagers today. But, if so, that is a mistake. Youth culture today is different from that found in the earlier, more tumultuous era. Most religious communities’ central problem is not teen rebellion. Most religious communities’ central problem is teenagers’ benign “whatever-ism.” As long as religious communities presume falsely apocalyptic scenarios, they likely set themselves up for overreactions and pendulum swings in their ministry to youth. In fact, huge numbers of U.S. teenagers are currently *in* congregations, feel okay about them, mostly plan to continue to stay involved at some level, and generally feel fine about the adults in their congregations. But it simply *does not mean that much or make much sense* to many of them. This realization is likely a useful corrective of vision for communities of faith to know and work with as they relate to youth today.

Along those lines, it is important to realize that the allegedly widespread phenomena of “spiritual seeking” and an “I’m-spiritual-but-not-religious” identity among teenagers is, at this time at least, a bogeyman. Serious spiritu-

al seekers make up only about two percent of U.S. teenagers. The majority of U.S. youth appear to believe it is okay for *others* to be eclectic seekers, but they themselves are not in fact particularly interested. They are happy being part of the tradition they were raised in, which to them feels largely satisfactory, even if not terribly central or important. Religious leaders should stop worrying that their youth are heading by droves into Wicca, experimenting with Buddhism, or searching for alternative transcendent experiences. Instead, religious leaders might get on with the business of simply better animating and educating the youth in their midst.

It appears to us, in other words, that parents, pastors, ministers, religious educators, and congregational leaders concerned with youth need simply to *better engage and challenge* the youth already at their disposal, to work better to help make faith a more active and important part of their lives. The problem is not that youth won't come to church (most will), or that they hate church (few do), or that they don't want to listen to religious ministers or mature mentoring adults (they will and do). But this does not mean that youth are currently being well engaged by their religious congregations. They generally are not. Better engagement could involve multiple approaches, depending on the specific religious group in question; we'll discuss some possibilities that present themselves in light of the above findings.

First, the best way to get most youth more involved in and serious about their faith communities is to get their *parents* more involved in and serious about their faith communities. For decades in many religious traditions, the prevailing model of youth ministry has relied on pulling teens away from their parents. In some cases, youth ministers have come to see parents as adversaries. There is no doubt a time and place for unique teen settings and activities. Still, our findings suggest that overall youth ministry would probably best be pursued in a larger context of family ministry, that parents should be viewed as indispensable partners in the religious formation of youth. More broadly, one of the most important things that adults who are concerned about how teenagers' religious and spiritual lives are going to turn out can do is to focus attention on strengthening their own and other adults'—especially parents'—religious and spiritual lives. For in the end, they most likely will get from teens what they as adults themselves are. Like it or not, the message that adults inevitably communicate to youth is: “Become as I am, not (only) as I say.”

Second, in general, parents and faith communities should not be shy about *teaching* teens. Adults do not hesitate to direct and expect from teens when it

comes to school, sports, music, and beyond. But there seems to be a curious reluctance among many adults to teach teens when it comes to faith. Adults often seem to want to do little more than “expose” teens to religion. Many adults seem to be almost intimidated by teenagers, afraid to be seen as “uncool.” And it seems many religious youth workers are under a lot of pressures to entertain teens. In fact, however, we believe that *most teens are teachable*—even if they themselves do not really know that or let on that they are interested. Parents, ministers, and adult mentors need to develop more confidence in teaching youth about their faith traditions and expecting meaningful responses from them. Teaching happens, in fact, by somebody or other. Youth learn everything they know from someone, somewhere. Many youth actually consciously do want to be taught; they are open to being influenced by good word and example. Faith communities have no reason to apologize for or be insecure about teaching their youth. Adults should be aware, however, that better adult teaching of youth will require stronger adult relationships with youth. More important in the effective religious teaching of teens than, say, new pedagogical techniques will be the building of sustained, meaningful, personal adult relationships with the teens they teach. This will require investments of time, attention, and readiness to be open and vulnerable with teens.

Third, it seems to us that religious educators need to work much harder on *articulation*. We were astounded that for many teens we interviewed, it seemed as if we were the first adult to ever ask them what they believed. By contrast, the same teens could be remarkably articulate about other subjects about which they had been drilled, such as drinking, drugs, STDs, and “safe sex.” It was also astonishing to see how many Christian teens were, for example, comfortable talking generally about “God” but not specifically about “Jesus.” Philosophers like Charles Taylor argue that inarticulacy undermines the possibilities of reality.² So, for instance, religious faith, practice, and commitment can be no more than vaguely real when people cannot talk much about them. Articulacy fosters reality. A major challenge for religious educators of youth, therefore, seems to be fostering articulation, helping teens *practice talking about* their faith, and providing practice at using vocabularies, grammars, stories, and key messages of faith. Especially to the extent that the language of faith in American culture is becoming a “foreign language,” educators have that much more work to do with helping their students practice speaking that other language of faith. Our observation is that religious education in the United States is currently failing our youth when it comes to the articulation of faith.

Fourth, religious youth workers may have an opportunity to tap into teens' strong inclination toward individualism to challenge their often highly conventional styles of doing religion and to bring faith issues out of the background and into the foreground of their lives. How can religious youth workers help to make problematic and interesting issues of religious belief, practice, theology, and commitment? We suspect that there are opportunities to show youth how very conventional they are actually acting, to demonstrate how unexciting they are in their approach to faith, and to create discomforts that motivate them to more seriously engage what faith is and might be in their lives. One example of this is to challenge the strong life-course assumptions that inform youth's thinking about faith, provoking teens to question why they should necessarily go along with standard cultural scripts about what religious people do at different life stages. Why should they not be different? The individualism American youth have absorbed will never be displaced, but it may be able among youth to be somewhat leveraged to better ends as defined by the perspectives of their respective faith communities.

Fifth, religious communities might help themselves and their youth think more carefully about the distinctions between (1) serious, articulate, confident, personal, and congregational faith, versus (2) respectful, civil discourse in the pluralistic public sphere, versus (3) obnoxious, offensive faith talk that merely turns people off. Most U.S. teens are keenly aware to observe the second and to avoid the third of these. Because of a common lack of distinction observed between these three, however, it appears that the first often gets lost. It seems to us that youth need to learn that committed and articulate personal and congregational faith does not have to be sacrificed for the sake of public civility and respect for others who are different. Pluralism does not have to produce thinness and silence. But for it not to, people need to learn to distinguish between the three things above. Along similar lines, religious communities should better attend to their faith particularities. In efforts to be accessible and civil, it seems that many youth—and no doubt adults—are getting the wrong messages that historical faith traditions do not matter, that all religious beliefs are basically alike, that no faith tradition possesses anything that anybody particularly needs. This seems to produce a bland “oatmeal” approach to faith or a “lifestyle-preference” view of religion—which either ends up holding little challenge or interest for youth or forms them into consummate religious consumers. We suspect that there is plenty of room for faith traditions to claim and emphasize confidently their own particularities

and distinctiveness without risking religious division or conflict. Youth should be able to hear and embrace the particularities of their own faith traditions and why they matter, without having to be afraid that this inevitably causes fighting and discomfort.

In our view, this last point also connects to the issue of moral foundations and commitments: youth need to be challenged around their often incoherent presumptions that everyone instinctively shares the same morality, that individuals can be free to choose whatever morality they want for themselves, and that the human good is self-evident to all. Religious communities might better engage their youth with the ideas of the actual diversity of moral traditions, the potential not only for human goodness but also for human failings and evils, the arguably relative long-term vulnerabilities of broadly humanistic moral and social systems, and the *de facto* impossibility of never judging other people's moral actions. Having been formed to see these realities, youth may then better appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of the moral groundings and teaching of their own religious traditions and take more seriously in their own lives the particularities of their own faith communities and commitments.

Another important general way religious congregations may better engage youth is through simple, ordinary adult relationships with teenagers. Adults other than family members and youth ministers could be intentionally encouraged to make better efforts to learn teens' names, to strike up conversations with teens, to ask meaningful questions of youth, to be vulnerable themselves to youth in various ways, to show some interest in teens, to help connect them to jobs and internships, to make themselves available in times of trouble and crisis, to work toward becoming models and partners in love and concern and sacrifice. This would no doubt resound positively in broader areas of youth religious belief, commitment, and practice and in youth outcomes more generally. None of this takes a Master of Divinity degree. It is simply a matter of appreciation, attention, effort, and continuity from ordinary mature adults. But fostering this will require intentionality on the part of leaders. It will also require care around the issue of possible interested adults who are not adequately mature or trustworthy. In general, many U.S. teens greatly need more and better relational ties to adults who care about them. And religious congregations are a natural place for that to occur.

Furthermore, regular *religious practices* in the lives of youth beyond those in and of collective weekly congregation seem to be extremely important.

There is no question that, empirically, more seriously religious teens intentionally engage in a variety of religious practices, and less religious teens do not. This, of course, is in part the definition of “more and less religious” per se. But beyond that, it is also clear that very basic practices of things like regular Scripture reading, prayer, and intentional works of service and mercy mark and structure the lives of teens committed to faith and do not for teens not committed to faith. There is no single, simple causal direction in this. Yet we observe a clear empirical fact that comports with theoretical and theological expectations: strengthening the faith lives of youth does, and so should, involve the formation of religious practices. Youth should be taught to *practice* their faith, not only in the sense of acting it out (as with, “She’s a practicing Catholic”) but also in the sense of consistently working on skills, habits, and virtues in the direction of excellence in faith, analogous to musicians and athletes practicing their skills. Many religious teens in the United States appear to engage in few religious practices. But even basic practices like regular Bible reading and personal prayer seem clearly associated with stronger and deeper faith commitment among youth. We suspect that youth educators and ministers will not get far with youth, in other words, unless regular and intentional religious practices become an important part of their larger faith formation.

While religious congregations are not particularly losing out to neo-paganism and New Age spirituality, our research suggests that religious congregations *are* losing out to school and the media for the time and attention of youth. When it comes to the *formation* of the lives of youth, viewed sociologically, faith communities typically get a very small seat at the end of the table for a very limited period of time. The youth-formation table is dominated structurally by other more powerful and vocal actors. Hence, as we mentioned above, most teens know details about many television characters and pop stars but are quite vague about Moses and Jesus. Most youth are well versed about drunk driving, AIDS, and the dangers of drugs, but many truly have little clue about their own tradition’s core ideas. Many parents also clearly prioritize homework and sports over church or youth group attendance. This is, of course, complicated business, and we do not pretend to have answers. It is hard to argue from a faith perspective, for instance, that school per se is bad or that believers should stop all media consumption. However, religious families could consider significantly reducing their time spent watching television and pointless movies and being more critical and discriminating about the

television programming and movies they do watch. In any case, one way or another, religious communities that are interested in the faith formation of their youth simply must better address the structural “competition” of other, not-always-supportive institutions and activities. This will likely require developing new and creative norms, practices, and institutions appropriate to specific religious situations and traditions.

Another possible implication that communities of faith might consider is this: just because many teens are not actively involved in a religious congregation does not mean that they would not become active under certain conditions. It is only a relative minority of nonreligious teens who are positively and strongly hostile to religion. Most have rather vague or nonexistent reasons for their lack of religious involvement and commitment. Many actually profess to feel positively about religion. Many religious leaders and clergy may perceive nonreligious youth as a hard-to-reach population. We have come to think that, on the contrary, many seemingly nonreligious teens could be drawn into active religious lives with more initiative and greater expressions of interest by sincere religious believers, good youth programming, increased proactive invitations by friends and adults to attend and participate, and readiness to have friendly and honest discussions on issues in the minds and hearts of the non-religious youth.

Communities of faith would also do well to become more aware that a primarily instrumentalist view of faith is a double-edged sword. For many parents in the United States, religious congregations are good and valuable because they produce good outcomes in their children. Many clergy seem to capitalize on this to appeal to families of children and adolescents. It is an empirical fact that religiously involved youth generally do better in life than youth not religiously involved, for various reasons. This can be heartening for religious believers. But making this into religion’s key legitimating focus easily degenerates into a “church-is-good-because-it-will-help-keep-my-kid-off-drugs-and-increase-their-seatbelt-usage” mentality. This obviously undermines larger and deeper questions of truth, tradition, discipleship, and peoplehood that matter to communities of faith. We have no simple answers. But we think religious leaders need to be more aware of and better grappling with the fact that an instrumentalist, “public-health justification” model of faith as producing healthy and good citizens (instead of, say, committed believers) may increase congregational attendance but comes at a long-term cultural cost: faith and practice get redefined as instrumental therapeutic

mechanisms to achieve personal goals that themselves may or may not be formed by religious faith and practice.

Finally, most generally, we repeat exactly what we said in the conclusion of *Soul Searching*: adults of all sorts in religious communities should be taught to stop thinking about teenagers as aliens or even “others.” Any generation gaps that exist between teens and adults today are superficial compared with and far outweighed by generational continuities. Contemporary teenagers are almost entirely bought into the mainstream system, anxious to succeed on the system’s terms, and well socialized to want to enjoy the consumerist and experiential benefits of U.S. society as much as they are able. Most problems and issues that adults typically associate with youth as “teenage problems” are in fact closely linked to adult-world problems. Furthermore, most teens appreciate their relationships with adults, and most of those who lack them wish they had such ties. Moreover, the traditional “storm-and-stress” model of adolescence accurately depicts only a minority of teens and, in our view, is a counterproductive lens through which adults in faith communities (and beyond) view youth. That lens unnecessarily and unhelpfully creates distances when what is greatly needed is connection. Adults need alternative ways of thinking and talking that emphasize adult similarities with, ties to, and common futures with youth.

No doubt there are other useful implications of the NSYR findings that we have not mentioned or that we do not have the perspective to see. In any case, many of the above suggested implications center on the general observation of frequent misplaced concerns and misguided perceptions among adults in religious communities concerning youth and what seems to us to be the need to refocus and recommit to certain good practices around youth ministry and, more broadly, congregational life. Some of these implications—for example, dealing with competition with schools and the media—are quite challenging. But others are within the realistic possibilities of many religious denominations and congregations to act upon. What exactly of the above ideas, if any, apply to which religious community is for different religious communities themselves to determine. Whatever diverse communities of faith decide about their work with youth, however, it is clear to us that much more attention to and discussion about the lives of teenagers is warranted if such faith communities desire to be faithful and effective in their work of faith engagement, formation, and education. We hope this lecture provides a useful step to that end. This may be only a beginning. More extended, soul-searching conversa-

tions will have to continue well beyond what we offer here. But this, we trust, is a helpful start.

Notes

1. This lecture is a version of “Conclusive Unscientific Postscript,” from *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, copyright © 2005 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

2. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); “Self-Interpreting Animals,” in *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 45–76.